

Longjaw cisco sounds like the name of a gunslinger from a John Wayne western. But it was just a type of deep water whitefish in the Great Lakes sought after by fisherman. The fish were most abundantly harvested in the 1930s when they were smoked and sold to the masses, presumably fueling the economies of the region and filling many dinner tables. But overfishing, pollution, and predation from introduced species eventually led to its inclusion as a member of the first class of federally protected endangered species in 1967. However, by the 1980s, fishermen weren't even pulling any nets up to throw back into the water. It was declared extinct in 1983, just a few years after John Wayne died himself.

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The American mastodon went extinct about 11,000 years ago. They roamed North America in search of twigs and grasses to munch, but often found tar pits and saber-toothed cats and hunters that consumed the mastodons instead. An important source of meat to our distant ancestors, the glorious hunts and mastodon feasts were probably recounted fondly for generations, before the stories were seen as only old fairy tales or simply forgotten. It wasn't until the 1700s that the bones of a mastodon were "discovered" by people who might have descended from the hunters who probably killed and ate the last one.

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The Falls-of-the-Ohio scurfpea was a plant native to Rock Island along the Ohio River. It was thought to be commonly eaten by the American Bison, which had been killed off in the area by the early 1800s. This correlation, that was spun as a possible causation for the plant's decline, seems odd considering their dynamic as plant and four-legged lawnmower. Perhaps it's an oversimplification to assume a plant doesn't find some value in being trimmed by the teeth of a buffalo. Perhaps it should also be pointed out that the plants didn't disappear until eighty years

after the last bison in the region was shot. Not that it matters much to the scurfpea, a dam was built in the 1920s that flooded Rock Island and would've wiped them out anyway.

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Rocky Mountain locust swarms were said to reach biblical plague sizes as they ate their way through farm after farm. In April of 1875, it was said that a 198,000 square mile swarm made its way west. Some states once offered a bounty of up to one dollar for each bushel of collected locusts. Others required all able-bodied men to spend at least two days during harvest time killing the locusts or face a ten dollar fine. Less than three decades after these insects blotted out the western sun, they seemed to have disappeared. The Rocky Mountain locust had been so plentiful that not many specimens had been kept for future scientific research. Now dead ones are pulled out of a glacier in Montana that's slowly melting away.

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The ivory-billed woodpecker is often listed along with the dodo and the passenger pigeon as the holy trinity of birds driven to extinction by humanity. Taxidermied specimens are mounted to old cut logs, their faded feathers and lifeless glass eyes on display in cabinets across the country. But there have been blurry instamatic photographs, shaky video footage, and echoes of the ghostly bird's tin trumpet call ringing through the woods since its last confirmed sighting in 1944. Perhaps one day we'll find a pair living their lives out in the woods, unaware that we had been looking everywhere for them.

I wonder if the ivory-billed woodpeckers, seeking refuge from the world that assumes they're probably dead, tell stories to their chicks about Longjaw Cisco, the non-existent gunslinger. Cisco is probably standing in a muddy street outside a saloon, facing the villain who smoked his father. The villain probably says some stereotypical line like, "this town ain't big enough for the two of us!" before reaching for his ivory handled revolvers. But Longjaw Cisco's hands are quicker than a grasshopper, and the villain drops to the ground. Then Cisco mounts his trusty steed, Scurfpea, and rides out to the next town.

But when the chicks grow up, perhaps they'll have to face the fact that Longjaw Cisco

didn't actually win. He lost his duel with humanity and now all that seems to remain is a brief Wikipedia page, a blurry photo of a fish on a blue background, and my desire to photoshop that fish's head onto a cowboy's body and put it on a t-shirt. I wonder if the fish would find that funny, or if it is insensitive since my species is the one that fished them out of existence.

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I wonder if we're doomed to keep wiping out entire species – like we're just the bullet in the chamber of a gun, pointed toward target after target, held by some gunslinger of extinction. We dredged all the longjaw ciscos from the depths of the Great Lakes. We killed off the mastodon 11,000 years ago. We washed away the site of the scurfpea's extinction with a dam. We squashed all the swarms of sun-blotting Rocky Mountain locusts. But maybe the ivory-billed woodpecker is still out there. Maybe it's defiantly calling out in the woods that it is alive and dares mankind to really give it their best shot this time. Maybe it doesn't even know what humans are anymore. Maybe – hopefully – the ivory-billed woodpecker is the one that got away.